

“Incredible strength” Luke 6:27-38

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most-High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

What a text for us to reflect on, what a message! A fragment from the most famous speech in the history of humanity, from the Sermon on the Mount. Except in Luke's account the setting is different. Likely, Jesus spoke those words more than once.

Anyhow, today we are going to face some challenging exhortations. This is how our today's reading begins. “But I say to you who hear....” Isn't that interesting? Jesus is speaking to great crowds, but then He narrows down those who He addresses.

“You, those who truly hear, those who listen carefully, those who indeed pay attention and take seriously what I say – to you I say...”. Pastors could sometimes use the same formula addressing their congregations. “I speak to you, to those who truly listen, to those who take these words seriously as God's own message.”

Then comes the message. The exhortation. O boy... This Jesus! What He does – He takes aim at all the self-professed good and moral people, using those piercing and accusatory and offensive words. So, what it going on?

How would we define what is a good person? Or better, what sort of definition would be quite widely accepted in our society. What is a good person? What about this? Someone who loves their family and friends, who cares for them, who supports them in different situation, such one could be called a good person. How does it sound?

Quite agreeable? Sure... And this is where Jesus gets really offensive. He asks these uncomfortable questions. "But who doesn't do that? Who doesn't love those who love them? Who doesn't care for those who care for them? Who doesn't lend to those who will repay the debt?" May be a few don't... But most people do. Even sinners.

When you look at it this way, it suddenly gives a different perspective. But of course, even those open sinners do that, those whom even our society would dare to call sinners, or at least would acknowledge that they are not good people.

Criminals, felons, vicious and unlawful people, they too do the same. They too love those who love them, they too care for those who care for them. They too can be very attached, faithful, committed to those who make their lives better.

What's a big deal? It is just a common sense. We can't live and survive on our own. We need to be a part of a community, of a support network. All people need it, and why wouldn't you do something that makes your life easier and more enjoyable?

As Jesus said: "What benefit is that to you? What credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same." How would acting that way make you a good person? Obviously, more is needed and Jesus tells exactly what that more looks like.

Now, brace yourselves, those who truly hear, for this is what Jesus demands and expects from us. Let's read it again. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."

How does it sound? Seriously? We are so used to these words. Too used. Too familiar. But let's pause and let them sink in... A certain professor in one of New York's Universities asked secular students to read the Sermon on the Mount and to provide their feedback on these exhortations. How did that go?

What was their reaction, what do you think? Some got angry, some thought all of that was foolish and those instructions of Jesus were non-sensical. But, of course, just think about it – how do we feel when someone acts as your enemy?

Or when someone hates you, or curses you and abuses you? How do you feel? And why do we feel that way? Because we value ourselves. Our Creator has grafted it on our hearts, that you are someone special.

That you deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and all people feel that way. And when you are hated, disrespected, cursed, abused, persecuted, it is like touching an open nerve. The pain signals travel to our very heart. For we want to

be loved, and appreciated and treated well. When the opposite happens, it feels like our very existence is threatened.

This being said, why would Jesus command us, those who truly listen to Him, to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who abuse us, and so on and on. Why?

Why would He say it? Because... Jesus cares for us. He cares for His own. He cares for you, who truly listen to Him. He cares for your spiritual well-being. "What do you mean, pastor, how is this strange exhortation caring for us?"

Think what happens when we react as our nature desire to someone who hates, curses, abuses us? What is our natural response? What emotions do we experience? Anger, bitterness, resentment, hatred, desire for revenge? That happens naturally.

Now, do you want to live with those passions? Do you want them to consume you, to fill your days and nights, to determine your mood, to take away your peace and joy and delight in the countless blessings that our kind Lord showers upon you?

Do such heated passions bring us closer to our merciful and forgiving God, or do they drive us away from Him? This is what Jesus wants to prevent. And if we are consumed by those passions, then we see this entire world, and our entire life from the place of anger and resentment. That is not a beautiful view. That really isn't something that we would wish for ourselves, or for anyone we care for.

Fine, but even if we don't want those passions to overtake us and to make us miserable, how on earth can anyone be able to follow what Jesus instructs us to do? Love your enemies! Not in this life! Not in this Universe!

To that we, who truly listen, can reply: "Sure, but we do not belong to this world. We know that we come from another world; our home is the Kingdom of God." Which means that we come from the place of incredible spiritual strengths.

How so? Because we come from the place where we are incredibly loved, with love that is like a consuming fire, holy, passionate, self-forgetful love. We come from the place where you are valued and appreciate so, so much.

Where your Creator and Redeemer looks at you with delight, with fatherly affection and unshakable commitment to you. We come from the place where you are surrounded by loving family, divine family, and so we know that we are so loved, so adored, so protected that we are enabled to see others, even those who act as our enemies, for what they are. And what are they?

You know the answer. Every human being is a wonderful creature of God, created for eternal glory, loved by God, so loves that God's own Son, the Second person of the Holy Trinity gave His life for them as well. For each and every one.

We also know that every human being is fallen. Fallen prey to sin, that their beautiful hearts, created capable for so much good, are now corrupted, twisted, scarred by their experiences, by spiteful words and actions of others.

That unless liberated by Christ, all people live as slaves under the spell of satan. Deep down in the heart of their hearts still longing for the divine love and acceptance, but nevertheless sometimes treating others as their enemies.

When Jesus says “love them!” – it is not about feeling affection or desiring to be friends with people who act as our enemies. It is about larger reality. It is about caring for their eternal fate, for their standing with God, for their salvation.

This is how we also understand this exhortation: “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” It is not about us indulging the earthly and twisted cravings and passions of others, hoping that they will do the same for us.

This is said to those, who listen, to God’s own people. And what do we want? That others would help us to follow our Lord Jesus, to be His faithful disciples, to heed to His exhortations and to live as royal priests and chosen race, as God’s children.

This is what Jesus hopes we will do for others. That we will help them on this narrow path, which is by no means easy. Especially, when we need to do things like “loving our enemies and praying and blessing those who hate and curse us”.

We can’t do this on our own, but the Holy Spirit gives us strength, He enables us to desire good even for our enemies, to pray for them, to bless them and to hope that one day, in this life or the next, we may see them free from their sinful condition, beautiful and lovable as our God intended them to be.

When this happens by the power of God’s own Spirit, then we truly live as God’s people, as true sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven, for as Jesus reminded us, “He is kind even to the ungrateful and the evil.” Then the world can witness the incredible strength and peace and joy that our loving Father so abundantly provides for us. For those who hear, who truly listen to Him.

Then we shine like stars in this world, we stand tall as lighthouses, projecting our light far away, serving those who may be tired from the empty promises and darkness of this world, helping them to find their way to our Father’s house.

So, yes, let’s draw our incredible strength from the bottomless well of Christ’s love. Let’s strive to love even our enemies. With our kind words, with our self-sacrificial actions, with our prayers and blessings. Like our Father does.

Let’s live as sons and daughters of the King of kings. For this is who you are. You who truly listen.

Amen.